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One Man's Quest To Find the Perfect Burger In and Around Greenville

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ONE MAN'S
QUEST TO FIND
THE PERFECT
BURGER

IN AND AROUND

GREENVILLE



BY DAMIEN PIERCE

I'm a Texan. If you're reading this outside of the Lone Star State, you're probably wondering why such a bold introduction is necessary. Not that a Texan needs a reason to boast about their native land, but frankly, there isn't a stronger statement that explains my devotion to beef.

When I moved to South Carolina four years ago, I left behind bovine country. Cattle have been grazing Texas grasslands for two centuries, and not long after their arrival, Texans discovered that good things happen when beef meets flame. So when I said goodbye to my home state, I'll admit my stomach was apprehensive. No more smoked brisket. No more 72-ounce sirloin steaks. No more fajitas. And unmercifully, no more burgers.

Sure, it has come to my attention that a hamburger can be found anywhere. It's a staple of American cuisine, and every region has their take on it. But the genius of resting a slab of ground beef between two slices of bread wasn't invented in the South. The hamburger was conceived in a Texas grocery store. From there, we learned how to dress our burgers properly without degrading the meat with an overabundance of toppings and condiments. If anyone has perfected it, it's us Texans.

I know what you're thinking: Who let a Texan write in a South Carolina magazine anyway? But here's the thing: I want to be wrong. I want to unearth a great burger joint in my new backyard, a place that will at once remind me of home and send me into a blissful coma of



ONE "MEATERY" AT A TIME

Even though the "genius of resting a slab of ground beef beneath two slices of bread" wasn't invented in the South, the author found many Upstate burgers that enlist innovative ingredients, including The Cuban (facing page).

caramelized ground beef.

I want to consume a burger that is molded by hand, and seared medium to medium-well so that the patty has that lovely charred texture.

I want to pull a burger into my mouth that requires two hands to lift it and an absence of table manners.

I want to find the perfect burger in the Upstate.

And so, that became my mission. My quest wasn't to rank the best burger joints; instead, it was simply to discover a damn good burger. I took recommendations from colleagues and conducted my own research to compile a list of viable contenders. For my own snobbish sensibility, I ignored national chain restaurants. If I was going to clog my arteries, I wanted to ensure they were being clogged with the good stuff.

Armed with Lipitor, I set out to satisfy my craving. I visited

restaurants, diners, grills, and food trucks across the Upstate. I even entered a few dumps. And for this Texan, the results were humbling.

The Illusionist

There are thick-patty lovers, and there are thin-patty lovers. There are purists who admonish excessive condiments, and there are revolutionaries that dump the kitchen cabinet on their burger. There are even lost causes who order the veggie burger. But putting those personal and regional preferences

aside, our introduction to this staple of Americana is basically the same.

No one understands this better than Anthony Gray. As executive chef at Bacon Bros. Public House in Greenville, Gray set out to re-create our collective experience. But fair warning: This isn't exactly the burger of your youth.

"I wanted to have the burger that I grew up with," Gray says. "When you talk about the comforts of food and what people connect with, most people love burgers. I remember being a kid

I WANT TO PULL A BURGER INTO MY MOUTH THAT REQUIRES TWO HANDS TO LIFT IT AND AN ABSENCE OF TABLE MANNERS.

The Comeback



DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Thick patty versus thin, gourmet bread versus supermarket bun, high-end fixings or no frills, there is a burger for every taste in the Greenville area. Clockwise from left: The Pastrami, Southern Comfort, and The Roadhouse—from The Strip Club 104.

and having American cheese melted over the burger itself. Burgers resurface different feelings and memories. When I think of a cheeseburger, I still think of a McDonald's burger on a sesame seed bun. I wanted to keep within that theme, but I also wanted to make a burger that is unique to Bacon Bros."

For the most part, Gray's masterpiece is as traditional as it gets. Stripping Bacon Bros.'s "The Burger" down to its bare essentials, this sandwich utilizes fresh bread, pickles, melted American cheese, and a special sauce that combines equal parts of ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, and hot sauce. Classic enough, right? The twist is in the seven-ounce beef patty. Gray uses a blend of chuck, brisket and—this being Bacon Bros.—ground bits of bacon. The result is a rich, moist patty with a 70-30 meat-to-fat ratio.

Halfway into the burger, I realized that becoming a permanent resident of South Carolina might not be a bad thing. This sandwich embodies everything that a burger purist craves, but it almost doesn't taste like a burger because of the inclusion of brisket. Brisket—with its intense, beefy flavor—has a way of doing that. But as a beef enthusiast, I'm not griping. This actually felt like home. "I want our customers to have that (childhood) experience," Gray says. "But I also want that first bite to take them to a different place."

The Purist

Lest anyone forget that ground chuck is the most pure cow ingredient in a burger patty, there's The Chuck Truck. Leave it to a food truck to be conventional.

For nearly two years, this restaurant on wheels has been serving 1/3-pound certified Angus beef burgers in parking lots across Greenville. The menu has four different burgers—including the N'Awlins Burger with andouille sausage—but on the afternoon that I visited the truck parked outside The Community Tap, I opted for the standard choice: the Chuck Cheeseburger.

There's a reason for my simplicity (besides being from Texas). As appealing as the other sandwiches are on the menu, the star here is the meat. The hand-pressed, nicely seasoned chuck patty is charred perfectly. That means adding additional ingredients is a gamble. Go too far, and the sum of the parts will overshadow the greatness of the patty.

"I definitely didn't want the ingredients to distract from the beef," says David Allen, the truck's owner and chef. "I wanted a perfectly good charred burger with fresh ingredients."

Perched on a toasted French roll, the Chuck Cheeseburger is topped with lettuce, tomato, pickles, crispy red onions, and a signature aioli sauce. The Swiss cheese excels where cheddar and others might fail as a compliment to the patty. It doesn't complicate or overpower the meat's juicy flavor. That said, I did splurge on one addition: the smoked apple-wood bacon. Even for a Texan who is more faithful to beef than all other meats, there's room for a sliver or two of pig.

The Hole-in-the-Wall Burger

If I learned nothing else in my quest, it's this: The best burgers



"IF WE WERE GOING TO OPEN ONE DAY A WEEK FOR LUNCH...I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING AWESOME."

—JASON CLARK, CHEF AND OWNER OF THE STRIP CLUB 104

are rarely found in a food court or strip mall. More often, they're located in joints where you'd least expect them—underneath an overpass, or in a shack on the side of the road.

For me, that happy accident is Northwest Grill. On the outskirts of Travelers Rest sits a redbrick building that is barely noticeable along Highway 276. Here, I found "The Burgerologist" manning the grill. "I put a lot of love into the burger," says John Allmond, who claims two doctoral degrees in burger flipping to justify his nickname. "It's a classic. I try not to mess with it."

The Northwest Cheeseburger is an epiphany of a no-nonsense

burger. Half a pound of freshly ground beef is sourced from a local butcher, seasoned, and grilled medium well. The burger is then sandwiched on a white bun, and stacked with American cheese, lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, onions, and pickles. There's nothing complicated about it. And yet, I've found myself coming back again and again, even when I was supposed to be sampling other burgers.

"I tried to make myself a burger one day," says Lisa Bayne, who co-owns the diner with Allmond. "It didn't turn out right. John was born with a talent."

The Temptress

For a steakhouse that features images of 1950s pinup girls hanging on the wall and a stripper pole in the bar area, it shouldn't come as a surprise that I felt like I was cheating on my wife when I visited The Strip Club 104. However, I want to be clear about this: I wasn't sinning because of the decor. The burger alone was sultry enough.

Every Friday at lunch hour, this steakhouse opens its doors with about 40 carnivores already waiting in line. What brings the masses is a mouth-watering, almost outlandish menu of 20 burgers. Ever crave a hot dog and homemade chips, or macaroni and cheese on your burger? You can get your fix here.

"If we were going to open one day a week for lunch, I wanted to be great at one thing: burgers," says Jason Clark, chef and owner. "Every burger is a different idea. You can't have a muffuletta burger without great olives, or a pastrami burger without onion straws and Swiss. You have to have the right ingredients. You have to make the pastrami. For every burger, I wanted to create something awesome."

Here's another fun fact about the burgers: They're all fresh-ground filet mignon. You read that correctly.

There's little doubt that each burger on the menu will make the person ordering it happy.

If you're feeling gluttonous, I'd recommend the "The Cuban." This colossal burger contains, among other ingredients, kasseri cheese, sliced prosciutto ham, and a healthy helping of pulled pork. Looking for some lighter fare? The "California" is basically a salad if you forget the giant slab of meat in the middle of

it, topped with ripe avocado, roasted plum tomatoes, smoked Gouda, and a balsamic glaze. During my visit, I opted for "The Roadhouse." The bun is soft and sweet, but durable enough to keep this beast in check. The other ingredients are just as seductive. Smoked Gouda cheese. Caramelized onions. Pecan-wood smoked bacon. A tower of onion rings. And just for good measure, horseradish sauce. With each bite into this moist burger, my eyes were rolling into the back in my head.

Once upon a time, I believed that burgers (the truly great ones anyway) shouldn't be ruined by an overabundance of toppings and condiments. Such a crime usually meant the chef was trying to cover up the fact that the meat was flavorless, or overcooked. However, with all its extras, this burger is flawless. And for a Texan, admitting that is like agreeing that Texas isn't its own country. It kind of makes me want to stick around the Upstate for a while. **F**

The Checklist

Bacon Bros. Public House

3620 Pelham Road
Greenville
864.297.6000
baconbrospublichouse.com

The Chuck Truck

Various locations
daveschucktruck.com

Northwest Grill

13045 Old White Horse Road
Travelers Rest, SC
864.610.0610

The Strip Club 104

104 East Poinsett Street
Greer, SC
864.877.9104
thestripclub104.com